A Historical Analysis of the Medieval Inquisition

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Reading Time: 10 minutes

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In the thirteenth century, there arose a dangerous heresy, Catharism, also known as Albigensianism, which spread rapidly in Southern France and even in parts of Germany as well. This gnostic Manicheistic heresy preached that the universe is perpetually in a battleground between the good god and the evil god, where they saw the material world as inherently evil. From this, then, the Cathars believed that the ultimate goal of human beings is to free themselves from the material world so as to be united with God, where they will have successfully foiled the plans of the evil god.[1] In response to this dangerous heresy that openly opposed and condemned the Church's teaching, Pope Gregory IX (1145-1241) in 1231

established a tribunal system, an Inquisition. This he entrusted to the Dominicans, since they were quite knowledgeable in the academic disciplines of theology and canon law,[2] and they served to judge suspected heretics. In Medieval society, heretics were seen as the enemies of both God and the state because they rejected the teachings of the Church and even the laws of the state. So, because heretics threatened society as a whole as well as the Catholic faith, the Church saw it as Her duty to protect not only the souls of the faithful but also the fallen-away souls of the heretics as well.

Because the threat of heresy was an ever-present concern to the Medieval world, the Church developed a procedure for the inquisitors to follow so as to ensure that the process adhered to a rational, legal method; this was to avoid having a monk rely simply on his spiritual fervor, which could easily become overtaken by his emotional impulses. From this, then, the Church would usually send a tribunal of three friars to preach the faith and the mission of the Inquisition, but mainly they would expound on the evils of a particular heresy. After this, the monks would entreat the faithful Catholics to come forward and give the inquisitors information on suspected heretics; the accused heretics would then have one week in which to appear before the tribunal. If they did not appear before the tribunal so as to face their charges, they would be excommunicated. If an accused person did appear before the tribunal, the inquisitors, who acted as both investigators and judges, would hold, according to Fr. John Vidmar, ". . . an *inquisitio generalis*, which determined whether some form of heresy had actually occurred, whether it was worth pursuing, whether the accused was 'triable.'"[3] This was actually a great advancement in Western society's legal process, which ultimately contributed to the development of modern law itself.[4]

So, if the inquisitors found the charges to be credible, the tribunal would read the list of charges to the accused, then witnesses would be called, and the trial would begin. Within a heretic's trial, an inquisitor would ask a series of questions in an attempt to see if the accused was really a heretic or not. If the inquisitor could not positively determine whether the accused was a heretic or not, he would resort to utilizing witnesses, spies, tests, or even torture if it was deemed necessary to gather evidence. This does not mean, though, that the Church sought to condemn people, as this was not the case; the Church would only offer convictions based on full proof of an individual committing heresy. After the conclusion of the investigations, the inquisitors would pronounce judgement on the individual in front of the townspeople, where, then, if the accused was found guilty, the inquisitors would declare the individual's punishment or sentence. This usually

involved prison sentences, pilgrimages, or wearing crosses for a period of time, but sometimes if the individual refused to recant, or he was found guilty of heresy a second time, there was nothing left for the inquisitors to do but to turn the heretic over to the state to be executed.[5]

Even though the Church had developed a logical, legal procedure in order to combat the threat of heresy, many people in the modern world still see the Inquisition as this dark period in history where the clergy was not only anti-Semitic but also intolerant of other viewpoints, ideologies, or faiths. These modern objections stem from the fact that the modern man does not understand the Medieval world. To the Medieval man, according to historian Thomas Madden, "heresy did not represent religious diversity. Far from it. It was seen as an insidious and cancerous threat to the well-being of Christendom and the salvation of the faithful."[6] Because modern man places his reason above God and divine revelation, he is unable to see the Inquisition any other way except as an intolerant and oppressive practice utilized by the Church so as to solidify Her power.

But besides this, the modern world has also misconstrued the overall use of torture and the amount of people that were executed during the Inquisition. This stems from the belief that the Church was not tolerant of other religions or that the inquisitors were outright blood-thirsty men who desired to coerce people into admitting heresies so as to burn them at the stake. This does not mean that abuses were not committed within the Inquisitions themselves, as indeed they were, but the modern world paints a picture that is far from an accurate depiction of history. For instance, now modern scholars know that when the Inquisitional courts adopted the use of torture, which was permitted within Roman law, they only used it as a final resort. This was employed if an accused person was believed to be lying, and all other methods of exacting a confession had been exhausted. But the use of torture could not be used as a source of punishment. Scholar Gary Michuta writes that:

> When [torture] was applied, it would only be once, and the application generally lasted no more than fifteen minutes. . . These restrictions made the application of torture relatively rare. The best estimates suggest that only two percent or less of cases before the Inquisition actually involved torture.[7]

Canon lawyer Edward Peters affirms this and adds that there were many

protections and protocols in place to protect the accused; he concludes his assessment that the use of torture was strictly a method of obtaining the truth of the matter.[8]

Since the modern world misconstrues the overall use of torture on heretics, they also exaggerate the number of heretics executed as well. This stems most likely as a result of the post-modernists, who use this false view of the Inquisition as a tool of propaganda against the Church Herself. But regardless, many individuals in the modern era believe that thousands of people were killed during the Inquisition, but modern scholarship shows quite the contrary. In the Medieval Inquisition, which was directly under the supervision of Dominican Bernard Guy (1261-1331), who gained renown after the publication of his official records, documents state that of his 930 sentences, only 42 were death sentences. The rest of his sentences were either works of penance, pilgrimages, or prison confinements.[9] In comparison to this very low number, at the height of the witch hysteria in Europe, over 100,000 people were executed at the stake.[10] Interestingly, the Inquisition in Spain actually prevented the spread of the witch hysteria there, thus saving and protecting lives as well. [11]

This does not mean, though, that the execution of heretics is intrinsically evil either as many prominent and holy saints in the Medieval world acknowledged that sometimes it indeed became necessary to execute heretics, especially when the heretic was threatening the salvation of other souls as well. St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), arguably the most prominent philosopher and theologian of the Middle Ages, believed that heretics presented the worst possible threat to society as a whole since they jeopardize the spiritual welfare of others.[12] This did not mean that he did not believe in practicing mercy; rather, he saw that if the heretic did not recant after a second time, there was little to no hope that the heretic would recant of his sins. Aquinas writes:

On the part of the Church, however, there is mercy which looks to the conversion of the wanderer, wherefore she condemns not at once, but ‘after the first and second admonition,’ as the Apostle directs: after that, if he is yet stubborn, the Church no longer hoping for his conversion, looks to the salvation of others, by excommunicating him and separating him from the Church, and furthermore delivers him to the secular tribunal to be exterminated thereby from the world by death. For Jerome commenting on Galatians 5:9, “A little leaven,” says: “Cut off the decayed flesh, expel the mangy sheep from the fold, lest the whole house, the whole paste, the whole body, the whole flock, burn, perish, rot, die. Arius was but one spark in Alexandria, but as that spark was not at once put out, the whole earth

was laid waste by its flame."[13]

St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), a theologian and reformer of the Church, concurs with this as he called for mercy, but he recognized that when heretics obstinately pursued heresy and attempted to win over others as well, force must be used in order to combat it.[14]

From this, though, the Inquisition actually offered many advancements to the West as a whole. One of the major contributions that the Inquisition provided was valuable developments in legal procedure, where many of these new advancements aided the development of modern law. Fr. Vidmar states that many of the legal contributions of the Inquisition can still be seen in the modern court, which were

> . . . pretrial hearings, graduation of crimes and sentences, manuals that provided judges with guidance and sentencing, . . . admonitions to investigators to be fair, safeguards against unfair behavior (mistrial), and provisions for the accused to defend themselves and make appeals to the pope in cases of perceived miscarriages of justice.[15]

In addition to this, with the necessity of protecting the faith of Europe, theologians and philosophers provided the West with moral and ethical reasoning to execute not only heretics but also diabolical criminals as well, thus presenting a rational defense of utilizing capital punishment. Edward Peters argues that with the fear of punishment or death, it probably helped lessen the threat of heresy overall in Europe as well.[16] This is because since man is a rational animal, the potential threat of punishment deters the deviant or illegal acts.[17] But arguably, the most important contribution that the Inquisition gave to the West is basically the preservation of the West itself. This is because the Cathars believed in a culture and religion that was diametrically opposed to the Church and the Medieval culture, and had they been allowed to exist unscathed; it is most probable that the West would have descended back into the Dark Ages. German historian Ignaz von Döllinger wrote that, "Had [the Cathars] triumphed, a general upheaval, a decline back into barbarism and pagan licentiousness would have been the consequence."[18]

So, by properly understanding the Inquisition, the modern world is then able to appreciate how the Church fervently desired to protect the spiritual unity of Christendom as a whole. By these heretics rejecting the faith, Christendom saw that their society was being threatened. Walter Brandmuller articulates this point

when he writes that, “Since Christendom as a whole regarded the Church’s faith as the foundations of its existence, attacking this faith of the Church simultaneously meant shaking the foundations of the societal order in general.”[19] But the modern world can also realize that the Inquisition was far from being barbaric as the legal process of the Inquisition was the most merciful and humane legal body that existed in the Medieval world. Plus, by implementing the Inquisition, it actually saved the lives of many Christians throughout Europe. This is because the Albigensians were extremely violent and cruel to Catholics;[20] this is actually principally the reason why Pope Gregory IX called the Albigensian Crusade and subsequently the Inquisition as he sought to protect the lives of the faithful and the teachings of the Church.

As it can be seen then, the Inquisition was a legal, theological process to combat heresy as heresy was seen as possibly the greatest threat to the spiritual, social, and political unity of Christendom. From this then, since the Church desired to save souls from eternal damnation, they tried to protect the souls of the faithful from heresy and the soul of the heretic, if possible, as well. Ultimately, the Inquisition shows how it is the duty of Catholics to safeguard the teachings of the Church and the souls of the faithful as well. For, if one does not protect the Church by condemning and correcting the heretics of this world, one will be held morally accountable as silence is complicity, thus, putting one’s own eternal salvation at risk. The Medieval world saw that it was the duty of man to protect Christ’s Church at all costs even if it meant losing one’s life. And they rightly understood Christ’s words that, “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” (Matt 16:25 *RSV*) Thus, when a Catholic protects and defends the Church from heretical errors, this is indeed a source of achieving the hope of everlasting life as man is obeying the Church’s call to be a soldier for Christ.

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[1] Thomas Madden, *A Concise History of the Crusades* (Lanham: MD, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 125.

[2] Walter Brandmuller, *Light and Shadows: Church History amid Faith, Fact, and Legend*, trans Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 111.

[3] John Vidmar, *The Catholic Church Through the Ages* (New York City: Paulist Press, 2005), 145.

[4] John Vidmar, *The Crusades and the Inquisition: Disputed Questions* (New York

City: Paulist Press, 2013), 71.

[5] Brandmuller, *Light and Shadows: Church History amid Faith, Fact, and Legend*, 114.

[6] Madden, *A Concise History of the Crusades*, 124.

[7] Gary Michuta, *Hostile Witnesses: How the Historic Enemies of the Church Prove Christianity* (El Cajoun, CA: Catholic Answers, 2016), 192.

[8] Edward Peters, *Inquisition* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 65.

[9] Brandmuller, *Light and Shadows: Church History amid Faith, Fact, and Legend*, 118.

[10] Charles H. Rieper, "Lecture I: The Age of Absolutism," Hum 253: Global Civilization," (Catholic Distance University: Charlestown, WV, 16, November, 2021).

[11] Thomas F. Madden, "The Truth of the Spanish Inquisition," (2 April 2011) at *Crisis Magazine*, https://www.crisismagazine.com/.

[12] Peter Karl Koritansky, *Thomas Aquinas and the Philosophy of Punishment* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 5.

[13] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II, q. 11, a. 3, at New Advent, www.newadvent.org.

[14] Brandmuller, *Light and Shadows: Church History amid Faith, Fact, and Legend*, 109.

[15] John Vidmar, *The Crusades and the Inquisition: Disputed Questions,* 83.

[16] Peters, *Inquisition,* 138.

[17] Edward Feser and Joseph M. Bessette, *By Man Shall His Blood Be Shed: A Catholic Defense of Capital Punishment* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), 72-73.

[18] Ignaz von Döllinger, *The Church and the Churches*, trans. William Bernard Cabe (London: Hurst and Blackett Publishers, 1862), 54.

[19] Brandmuller, *Light and Shadows: Church History amid Faith, Fact, and Legend*, 123.

[20] Warren H. Carroll, *The Glory of Christendom: A History of Christendom, vol. 3* (Front Royal, VA: Christendom Press, 1993), 217.

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